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Harold Pinter's '*The Birthday Party*' and '*The Dumb Waiter*' As Absurd Plays

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Abstract: Amid life's inconsequential moments, meaning emerges—though at times, it hides beneath the illusion of meaninglessness. Such is the philosophy propounded by dramatists of Modern and Postmodern Literature, who went out of their way to resist traditional structures and stylistics in order to create a realist absurdism that does justice to the fragmented self and portrays it in all its rawness. Harold Pinter, the Nobel Laureate, British Playwright and Screenwriter, wrote 29 plays and dedicated most of his writing to the inexplicable human dilemma and the contradictory phenomenon one must face every day. The initial reception of Pinter's plays was not very positive due to /the inadequacy of many critics to place him within a particular dramatist's conventions defined by rigid standards and formal expectations. But they soon realised their mistake because Pinter was not part of any single movement, but rather at the forefront of something entirely new. '*The Birthday Party*' and '*The Dumb Waiter*' are two of his plays which are rarely studied in conjunction, but to understand the depth of Pinter's literary prowess in representing the absurd milieu, it becomes undeniably imperative to examine his works with a different lens every time. This present academic paper will posit that both of these plays are not only absurd, in every sense of the word, but are some of the finest works of drama that reject the idea of dramatic action and instead use mundane routines, circular language, silences and pauses and ambiguity to portray this world as it is rather than what it could be.

Keywords: Incongruous, Postmodern, Pinteresque, clichés, Mystery, Post-Modern, Absurd, illogical

Introduction: "The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. For the moment, it is all that links them together. It binds them one to the other as only hatred can weld two creatures together. This is all I can discern clearly in this measureless universe where my adventure takes place."¹

A mind torn between anxiety for the future and fear for survival is never at peace. Such was the restlessness of the Postmodern dramatists like Harold Pinter, who saw that the only meaning in this inherently meaningless world arose out of chaos instead of order. Regardless of what the people wished for, their 'reality' and 'fate' were, as they had been for a long time, unpredictable and ambiguous at best. These ambiguities needed representation more than the concrete and the certain that was prevalent in contemporary theatre. It hence gave rise to a group of dramatists that considered it their duty to adapt modern theatre to modern times and embrace

the chaotic world they lived in by replacing straightforward plots with circular routines, meaningful dialogues with seemingly inconsequential and nonsensical repetitions and ambiguous characters.

Harold Pinter, in his ‘Pinteresque’ style, was a master of the “fantastic goings-on of the Theatre of the Absurd”, which “reveal the irrationality of the human condition and the illusion of what we thought was its apparent logical structure”². Harold Pinter (1930–2008) was a groundbreaking British dramatist known for his poetic use of everyday speech, innovative pauses, and exploration of power, memory, and ambiguity. His work spans over five decades, blending modernist realism with postmodern uncertainty and absurdist themes. Awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2005, Pinter’s plays challenge the reliability of language and truth, often portraying alienation and the failure of communication. His career evolved from early ‘comedies of menace’ to politically charged works critiquing oppression and human rights abuses.

Pinter’s ‘*The Birthday Party*’ and ‘*The Dumb Waiter*’ are two of his works that are rarely studied in conjecture but have underlying potential of revealing his true literary prowess as an absurd writer. While both of these plays cannot be limited merely to absurdism, this present research paper will care to venture that perhaps the best way of interpreting them is through the lens of absurdism.

The Theatre of the Absurd, as pointed out by Martin Esslin, aims to “give expression to some of the basic issues and problems of our age, in a uniquely efficient and meaningful manner, so that they meet some of the deepest needs and unexpressed yearnings of their audience.”³. To this end, the dramatists who are broadly classified under this term have inculcated the following into their writings:

- Ambiguous and Fragmented Dialogue Reflecting the Inadequacy of Language
- Characters Trapped in Meaningless Routines and Environments
- Uncertainty and Ambiguity in Plot and Character Motivation
- Rejection of Logical Plot Structure and Conventional Resolution
- Comic surface concealing underlying tragedy

Absurdity & ambiguity through Dialogues & Language: In order to present the absurdity throughout the play, the dramatists like Pinter chiefly adopt language as a primary tool which covers the entire drama naturally. The essence of Pinter’s plays lies in the dialogue that is repetitive, sometimes bordering on clichés. But to discern their meaning, one must look at the implicit and the uncertain as the common and the mundane because that is the reality that the dramatist has strived to portray.

At the beginning of both plays, two characters appear to be in a routine (one that the reader is unfamiliar with) and engaged in an almost circular dialogue, which is deliberately meaningless and fragmented to portray Ben and Gus’ existential dread and underscore Meg and Petey’s inconsequential and mundane routine. In the opening act of *The Birthday Party*, Meg and Petey are present:

“Meg : Is that you Petey?
Pause. Petey, is that you?
Pause. Petey?
Petey : What?
Meg : Is that you?
Petey : Yes, it's me.

Meg : What? (Her face appears at the hatch). Are you back?
Petey : Yes. Meg. I've got your cornflakes ready. (She disappears and reappears.) ...
MEG enters by the kitchen door. Are they nice?
Petey : Very nice.
Meg : I thought they'd be nice. (She sits at the table.) You got your paper?
Petey : Yes.
Meg : Is it good?
Petey : Not bad.
Meg : What does it say?
Petey : Nothing much.⁴

A similar dialogue takes place between the two hitmen in '*The Dumb Waiter*', who find themselves in a 'prison-like' room that adds to their already anxious existence:

"BEN : Kaw! He picks up the paper. What about this? Listen to this!
He refers to the paper.

A man of eighty-seven wanted to cross the road... So he crawled under a lorry.

GUS : He what?
BEN : He crawled under a lorry. A stationary lorry.
GUS : No?
BEN : The lorry started and ran over him.
GUS : Go on!
BEN : That's what it says here.
GUS : Get away.
BEN : It's enough to make you want to puke, isn't it?"⁵

Both of these dialogues (interestingly enough, brought on by a newspaper) mirror each other not in the contents but rather in the breakdown of communication. In '*The Birthday Party*', communication appears to be more one-sided, and in '*The Dumb Waiter*', Ben and Gus avoid their dread by escaping into others' miseries, as can be seen through the newspaper. Further it can be seen that whenever Gus emerges as a voice of reason and tries to question their circumstances, Ben avoids him by escaping into the major headlines of the day.

Moving beyond the interactions among the characters, one can attribute their very existence to what Sartre described as the emergence of existence preceding the 'essence' of living. These characters do not live; they only exist. They are stuck in a meaningless routine in their lives, which has caused their 'humanity' to somewhat slip away, and the 'absurd' to surface.

Meg and Petey have adopted a foster child (Stanley) who himself is escaping from his problems in their lodging, that has presumably not had any visitors in years. His relationship with Meg has transformed from that of a landlady and tenant to that of a mother and son (bordering on incest). This unbreakable routine remains entirely unfazed even when Goldberg and MacCan abduct Stanley with barely any resistance from Petey. The earlier-quoted section from the beginning of the play is perhaps impossible to differentiate from that of its end, which takes place after countless tragedies have come to pass (Stanley's mental breakdown during the interrogation and Lulu being assaulted, to name a few).

"PETEY slowly goes to the table. He sits on a chair, left. He picks up the paper and opens it. The strips fall to the floor. He looks down at them. MEG

comes past the window and enters by the back door. PETEY studies the front page of the paper.

Meg : Where's Stan? [Pause.] Is Stan down yet, Petey?

Petey : No... he's....

Meg : Is he still in bed?

Petey : Yes, he's...still asleep.

Meg : Still? He'll be late for his breakfast.

Petey : Let him...sleep. [Pause.]”⁶

A similar conundrum hovers over Ben and Gus, although only one of them is deliberately oblivious, but the other (Gus) is constantly questioning his choice of being a part of an organisation that he knows nothing about. Their life is entirely centred around the dull rooms in which they are put to execute their job and then leave.

“GUS : I was just thinking about that girl, that's all.

GUS sits on his bed. She wasn't much to look at, I know, but still. It was a mess though, wasn't it? What a mess...

BEN : (sits up and clenches his eyes.)

Who clears up after we've gone? I'm curious about that. Who does the clearing up? Maybe they don't clear up. Maybe they just leave them there, eh? What do you think? How many jobs have we done? Blimey, I can't count them.

GUS : What cleaners and all?

BEN : You birk!

GUS : No, it was that girl made me start to think--”⁷

The element that haunts the characters with a hint of tragedy also comes from a place of unfamiliarity and ambiguity. For Stanley, the horrors that follow him are in the form of two tramp-like visitors, Goldberg and MacCan, who come as a disruptive force to his monotonous life. Not only is the audience kept in the dark about who Stanley is or was, but they also do not know for sure whether it truly is his birthday or just a ploy made by Goldberg and MacCan to exploit him. All that is certain is that Stanley was a pianist with a dream to tour the world but ended up in Meg and Petey's residence. His torture at the hands of the two protagonists brings all of his suppressed dread to the forefront, plunging him into a state of utter despair and helplessness.

“Goldberg Speak up, Webber. Why did the chicken cross the road?

Stanley : He wanted to--he wanted to--he wanted to....

McCann : He doesn't know!...

Stanley : He wanted....

McCann : He doesn't know. He doesn't know which came first!

Goldberg : Which came first?

McCann : Chicken? Egg? Which came first?

Goldberg and MC: Which came first? Which came first?
Which came first? [STANLEY screams.]”⁸

This ambiguity finds its way in ‘*The Dumb Waiter*’ through the character of Wilson (whom the reader never gets to meet) and The Dumb Waiter itself, which carries orders to Ben and Gus like their organisation ordering them to do something without reason or justification. The ambiguity which surrounds Ben, Gus and their employer create and maintains a tension throughout the play, which causes the audience to constantly question everything to discern a meaning, but as has already been stated, the only meaning can be found through acknowledging its meaninglessness.

“GUS sits on his bed. It's his place, all right. Look at all the other places.

You go to this address, there's a key there, there's a teapot, and there's never a soul in sight? (He pauses.)

: Eh, nobody ever hears a thing, have you ever thought of that? We never get any complaints, do we, too much noise or anything like that? You never see a soul, do you?? Except the bloke who comes. You ever noticed that? I wonder if the walls are soundproof. (He touches the wall above his bed.)

Can't tell. All you do is wait, eh? Half the time, he doesn't even bother to put in an appearance, Wilson.”⁹

The hilarious and comic elements in all of Pinter’s plays have been crafted specifically to conceal the characters' tragedies. In ‘*The Birthday Party*’, Meg and Petey’s repetitive routine and the game at ‘*The Birthday Party*’ seem as comical as the headlines that Ben keeps reading to interrupt Gus’s moments of clarity. In both of these episodes an apparent underlying tension is building up which is enough to cripple anyone (Stanley has already broken down). These seemingly comic scenes have a very heavy emotional weight for the characters who are suffering. In *The Birthday Party*:

“Stan : [MCCANN takes off the scarf.]

McCann : [to STANLEY.] I'll take your glasses. [MCCANN takes STANLEY's glasses.]
Meg Give me the scarf. Goldberg [holding LULU.]
Tie his scarf, Mrs Boles.

Lulu : (to Goldberg) Kiss me. [They kiss]

Meg : That's what I'm doing. [To STANLEY.]
Can you see my nose?

Goldberg : He can't. Ready? Right! Everyone move. Stop! And still”¹⁰

In ‘*The Dumb Waiter*’:

“GUS : wanders to his bed and presses the mattress. I didn't have a very restful sleep today, did you? It's not much of a bed. I could have done with another blanket too. (He catches sight of a picture on the wall.) Hello, what's this? (Peering at it.)
"The First Eleven. Cricketers. You seen this, Ben?

BEN : (reading). What?

GUS : The first eleven.

BEN : What? GUS. There's a photo here of the first eleven.

BEN : What first eleven?”¹¹

The ending of any Pinter play cannot be categorized as a ‘resolution’. Although certain elements of exposition and climax are present, Pinter does not adhere to the typical plot structure, owing to

his belief that, in a play as in real life, there is never a clear beginning or end. This absence of resolution permeates both of the above-mentioned plays.

In ‘*The Birthday Party*’, Goldberg and MacCan take Stanley away under the guise of taking him to a doctor. There is no indication as to where they are headed or whether or not they will ever return and hence Stanley’s face remains uncertain, but the audience can assume that it will not be a very positive one.

“Goldberg : He needs special treatment.
Petey : We'll find someone.
Goldberg : No. Monty's the best there is. Bring him, McCann.
[They help STANLEY out of the chair. They all three
move towards the door, left.]
Petey : Leave him alone!
[They stop. GOLDBERG studies him.]
Goldberg : [insidiously.] Why don't you come with us, Mr
Boles?
McCann : Yes, Why don't you come with us?
Goldberg : Come with us to Monty. There's plenty of room in
the car.

[PETEY makes no move. They pass him and reach the door. MCCANN opens the door and picks up the suitcases.] Petey [broken.] Stan, don't let them tell you what to do! [They exit]”¹²

In ‘*The Dumb Waiter*’, there is a similarly unresolved ending, where Ben has received his instructions and is awaiting his target—who turns out to be his associate, Gus. His decision remains ambiguous, as the audience is never told whether he actually chooses to kill Gus or not. Pinter deliberately omits any sound of a gunshot before the curtain falls, reinforcing this uncertainty.

“(Ben) He has arrived and will be coming in straight away. The normal method to be employed. Understood... He hangs the tube up. GUS!
The door right opens sharply.
BEN turns, his revolver leveled at the door.
GUS stumbles in.
He is stripped of his jacket, waistcoat, tie, holster and revolver. He stops, body stooping, his arms at his sides.
He raises his head and looks at BEN. A long silence.
They stare at each other.
Curtain”¹³

Conclusion: There are many elements of the ‘Absurd’ that can be found in Pinter’s plays, but this present research paper has tried to cover most of them. Pinter was not only a revolutionary playwright but an insightful genius when it came to literary vigour, as is evident from ‘*The Birthday Party*’ and ‘*The Dumb Waiter*’. Martin Esslin, when talking about Pinter, mentions: ‘*The Dumb Waiter*’ brilliantly fulfs Ionesco’s postulate in completely fusing tragedy with the most hilarious farce...Yet the main element of comedy is provided by the brilliant small talk behind which the two men hide their growing anxiety” ¹⁴

He also talks specifically about ‘*The Birthday Party*’:

‘*The Birthday Party*’...can equally well be seen as an allegory of death – man snatched away from the home he has built himself, from the warmth of love embodied by Meg’s mixture of motherliness and sexuality, by the dark angels of nothingness, who pose to him the question of which came rest, the chicken or the egg.”¹⁵

When one looks for the absurd in Pinter’s plays, it can be found everywhere but always deliberately and with meaning. Pinter’s ability to craft such comical yet heavy narratives of ambiguity are the reason that he has been etched into the highest echelons of British drama and has gained worldwide recognition.

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